

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -
Papers

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

January 2016

Since when were liberals authoritarian wowsers? Mike Baird exposes today's Liberal Party confusion

Gregory C. Melleuish

University of Wollongong, gmelleui@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>

Recommended Citation

Melleuish, Gregory C., "Since when were liberals authoritarian wowsers? Mike Baird exposes today's Liberal Party confusion" (2016). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 2532.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/2532>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Since when were liberals authoritarian wowsers? Mike Baird exposes today's Liberal Party confusion

Keywords

exposes, baird, mike, wowsers, confusion, authoritarian, party, liberals, were, when, since, liberal, today

Publication Details

Melleuish, G. C. (2016). Since when were liberals authoritarian wowsers? Mike Baird exposes today's Liberal Party confusion. *The Conversation*, August 13-3.



Since when were liberals authoritarian wowsers? Mike Baird exposes today’s Liberal Party confusion

August 30, 2016 10.26am AEST

It would seem to be the case that Mike Baird needs a refresher course in liberalism. AAP/Joel Carrett

One of the major issues facing the Liberal Party in the 21st century is what liberalism means today. At one level the answer should be simple: liberalism is about liberty and the ability of the individual to do as they please so long as they do not harm others.

Author

Consider this statement from early 20th-century Australia:



Gregory Melleuish
Associate Professor, School of History and
Politics, University of Wollongong

To compel people to wear a particular kind of dress, live in a certain kind of house, eat certain foods, and drink, or abstain from drinking, certain liquids, are all interferences with liberty, justifiable only when freedom, happiness and welfare of the general community cannot be secured without it.

A statement of principle from a card-carrying liberal? No, it is actually a passage from prime minister Billy Hughes' 'The Case for Labor' after he had extolled the greatness of John Stuart Mill's 'On Liberty'. It demonstrates how much liberal principles have pervaded Australian political culture.

Unfortunately, liberal ideals of liberty have sometimes been confused with other less liberal ideas, in particular the idea that legislation can be made to create "better people" and the idea that efficiency rather than liberty is what matters. These may be classified as false liberal principles.

An example of the attempt by liberals to create "better people" were the various schemes to limit the consumption of alcohol in the early 20th century. As many Australian liberals were also good Protestants they disapproved of a whole range of behaviours, ranging from the demon drink to gambling.

Liberty also became confused with efficiency because it was assumed a free individual would not squander and waste their freedom but behave in a manner that used their capacities in the most efficient and effective way possible. Liberty meant more than just doing as one pleased.

This leads us to Mike Baird and his actions as New South Wales premier. One should ask questions regarding the extent to which he has acted according to liberal principles or false liberal principles.

Greyhound ban

Consider first Baird's banning of greyhound racing in the state. This is quite an extraordinary policy; it will destroy a whole industry.

That there were some abuses is undeniable, but closing down all greyhound racing

rather than instituting reforms seems excessive, to put it mildly.

Why did he do it? It certainly looks like a manifestation of virtue signalling, with Baird attempting to earn a reputation as a “moral person”.

It was a move that will not cause any harm to core Liberal supporters on the North Shore and Sydney’s eastern suburbs. Most greyhound tracks in NSW are in regional and rural areas. I have two near me, at Dapto and Bulli. It is a country, working-class form of entertainment.

This move has a smell about it of “let’s teach those rednecks a lesson”, just as the Liberal Party a century ago wanted to control the drinking behaviour of the “lower orders”.

The point is that this sort of policy is not founded on liberal principles. Rather, it is an expression of the idea of “making better people” by weaning them off their supposedly cruel and barbaric practices. But, as former federal Labor leader Mark Latham has pointed out, the end of greyhound racing will also mean the end of greyhounds, as the breed was developed purely for racing.

It is an expression of what French historian Emmanuel Todd has called “zombie Protestantism”. Protestant religious belief may have declined but its values remain, especially the hope that governments should act to eradicate sin in the community. But then sin is always what people not like us do.

The other worrying thing about Baird’s ban on greyhound racing is the way in which he did it, announcing it on Facebook before going on holidays. Having made the decision, he decided he was “not for turning” and simply stonewalled in the face of considerable opposition. He wanted to be seen as strong as well as moral; or perhaps authoritarian and paternalistic.





Mike Baird's ban on greyhound racing will destroy a whole industry. AAP/David Moir

Local council mergers

The second policy that calls Baird's liberal credentials into question has been his amalgamations of many – but not all – local councils.

For any liberal there is a general principle that local matters should be dealt with at a local level, because locals have the best knowledge of what needs to be done. Even the Catholic Church believes in the principle of subsidiarity, which also means local issues require local involvement.

Amalgamating councils is justified on the principle of efficiency; that larger councils will be more efficient and less wasteful than smaller ones. This may or may not be the case. If one puts together two inefficient and incompetent councils the result may well be simply a larger incompetent council. It is difficult to see how amalgamations will solve the problem of council inefficiency.

However, larger – and more remote – bodies are most certainly not in line with liberal principles. They simply confuse liberty and efficiency, which are most certainly not the same thing.

However, the council amalgamations were certainly sold to the public as a supposed improvement in NSW's democratic governance. On what basis, one might ask.

As in the case of the abolition of greyhound racing, Baird attempted to sell a policy that is antithetical to liberty on the basis that it would somehow enhance our liberty. No, it does not – it is a creeping authoritarianism.

Perhaps Baird should go back and read Billy Hughes, who, after all, was the longest-serving parliamentarian in Australian history – and he was on Baird's side much longer than he was on the Labor side.

It would seem to be the case that Baird needs a refresher course in liberalism. Liberalism is not about “improving the people” by banning their entertainments, nor should it be confused with creating larger bureaucratic entities.